

YI.

THE HAND OF GOD RECOGNIZED.

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED

ON SUNDAY, 22^D FEBRUARY, 1846,

IN THE

INDEPENDENT OR CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

AT

DORCHESTER, ST. GEORGE'S PARISH, S. C.,

IN

OBSERVANCE OF THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

BUILDING OF THE CHURCH.

BY REV. GEORGE SHELDON,

Pastor.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

IN the year 1695, some pious, enterprising persons in Dorchester, Mass., and the adjoining towns, were led, by letters they had received from thence, and the verbal representations of individuals who knew the spiritual destitution of that region, to conceive the project of forming a colony "to go to Carolina and settle the gospel there." The Independent or Congregational Church at Dorchester, S. C., is the fruit of that enterprise. After the emigrants were organized into a church, and provided with a minister, ordained for the purpose, with their families, they left their former homes near the close of the year 1695. Early the year following, (1696) they selected a site upon the Ashley river for a settlement; giving the place the name of the one they had left. The house they then erected for public worship, still remains. It was built a quarter of a century earlier than any other for a similar purpose in the neighborhood, and having stood a *century and a half*, is a venerable memorial of the past, and an object of interest to those whose own or ancestral associations are connected with it. For further particulars of the founding and subsequent history of the church, see notes to following Discourse.

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DISCOURSE.

"ONE GENERATION SHALL PRAISE THY WORKS TO ANOTHER, AND SHALL
DECLARE THY MIGHTY ACTS."—*Psaln cxlv.*, 4.

It is a pleasing duty to celebrate the Divine faithfulness and mercy to us and to the whole family of mankind; for when so occupied, our employment is most akin to that of those pure spirits who surround the seat of the Heavenly Glory, and without weariness, interruption or sin, contemplate, adore and praise *Him that sitteth upon the Throne and the Lamb forever and ever*. It was not without just and sufficient reason that the people of God, in early times, were commanded not only themselves to bear in mind the Lord's doings, but to tell their children his wonderful works, and teach them all the way in which an omnipotent, covenant-keeping, merciful God, had led them from the first until then. It is right that a remembrance of his providential dispensations should be preserved among us, both for warning and encouragement; but how can this be more becomingly and effectually accomplished, than by communicating a knowledge of what we have heard from our fathers, and have our-

selves seen, to our children who may survive us, in the hope that they will transmit it to their's, and thus pass it on down the line of human being. Thus we may hope that the knowledge of the Lord's dealings will not be lost from among men. The influence of such transmission should be salutary ; for if it be found a fact, as it really is, that nothing has such an effect to move the dormant feeling and re-kindle the fires of patriotic emotion in any nation, as the recital of the deeds of their fathers—that if any thing has a tendency to make even degenerate sons less degenerate, and awaken desires for what is noble and good,—it is the revived remembrance of the glory of their ancestors ; how wholesome must the revived knowledge of the past ever be ? And particularly is it so in our case, when that knowledge relates to the smiles of Providence on the heroism, self-denial and prayers of those great and good men who were both our ancestors and instruments divinely employed in laying the foundation of a great nation.

The hand of God, visible in the providential ordering of the affairs of nations and of individuals, is clearly seen in the establishment and continuance of his church among men. The former was the spontaneous impulse of eternal love, displayed in the fulness of time, to retrieve the ruins of the fall, and the latter secured, through such a constancy of watchfulness and

an exercise of power, that we can only say, "It is the Lord's doing and is marvellous in our eyes." Indeed, the preservation of the universal church is "a standing miracle" of love and of power. Like the bush the Hebrew lawgiver saw in Horeb, ever burning, yet unconsumed, the church has been in flames of persecution and in fiery trials, but survives amidst them all. I might safely challenge any one to look at the facts in the case, and say if they would not argue a result different from what we witness. Behold the *paucity of numbers* of the worshipers of the true God, a mere handful in the midst of hosts of bitter foes, sufficient, it would seem, to overpower and swallow them up at any moment; the dark, turbid waves of *ignorance* that have rolled around the house of God, the unextinguished light of the world; the storms of bitter, continued *persecution* that have beaten upon it; the number of *false professors* there have, even in her brightest days, been within the pale of the church; consider that in the bosom of each true disciple even, there is enough of *remaining depravity*, were it uncontrolled by Divine Grace, to work the present and everlasting overthrow of that individual soul, and spread moral contagion around; and that the *very principles* of renunciation, self-denial and holiness, on which the church is founded, are antagonist to every feeling of the natural heart. Observe and ponder these things con-

nected with its history and constituents, and tell me what it is, except the mighty power of a covenant-keeping God, that has perpetuated the church from its establishment till now—of that God, who has purchased it with his own blood and built it upon a rock that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

But on this occasion we are specially called to record the mercy and faithfulness of the Lord in the establishment and preservation of the particular branch of Zion, with which we are connected in this land. “Surely the Lord hath done great things, whereof we are glad.” Nothing is more manifest, not the sun at mid-day, than is the hand of God in the planting of the American churches. Again and again has it been demonstrated, that the wrath of man *does* praise Him, while the remainder of the wrath he restrains. The wickedness of man is overruled for good; even his hostility to his Maker and hatred of the truths and methods of His grace, have both, by an unseen controlling influence, been so diverted as to build up and enlarge that very kingdom it was their aim to overthrow. As the persecution consequent on the death of the first martyr, Stephen, scattered the terrified disciples, and sent them abroad every where, preaching the word, and thereby a preached gospel was far more generally known than in the same time it could have been, were it not for the deadly effort of its

enemies to stop its diffusion ; so it is found in the history of an overruling Providence, the very efforts that were made to destroy the truth, have contributed to its growth and enlargement ; thus in the case before us, in the exact ratio as it was compressed and trodden down in the Old World, it sought expansion and relief by flight to, and a settlement in the New. So it was ordained, God should be known, and his kingdom set up in these ends of the earth. Among savage men and wild beasts, he had decreed a generation—yea, many generations to serve him. “It is the Lord’s doing and is marvellous in our eyes.”

The men forced to leave their homes and the scenes made sacred by the associations of their early years, through the overbearing influence of religious intolerance, and the fiendish spirit of an insufferable persecution, are, indeed, worthy of our admiration. Though not all of them thus, or equally thus ; for when, since the time a spotless Master chose twelve apostles for attendance on himself, and one of them proved a devil, has it been found that the purest bodies have not been rendered, in some degree, impure by unworthy components ? These exiles, with all their faults—and faults we admit they had, a part peculiar to the age, and a part the faults incident to our lapsed nature—were, as a body, men of whom the world was not worthy ; men who were imbued with apostolic zeal, fortitude

and self-denial ; whom God had raised up for the exigency of the times, to be instrumental in reforming and perpetuating the church of his dear Son ; men who counted not *their own lives dear*, if, so be, they might attain the glorious object they had in view. Such were the Huguenots, who flocked to Carolina after the revocation of the edict of Nantz, who were the progenitors of some that hear me ; and such the Puritans, who, for the most part, though not altogether, settled a higher latitude, and to some of whom, under God, we are indebted for the planting of this church. Having no rest for the soul at home, with the priceless treasure of God's pure word as their inheritance and the heritage of their children, with their lives in their hands, they buffeted the waves for three thousand miles, on a tempestuous ocean, and with their little ones, came to this wilderness that they might find here what was elsewhere denied them, the richest of Heaven's gifts,—**"FREEDOM TO WORSHIP GOD."** As they had been a blessing to the Old World by the wholesome influence of their principles,* so, in our land,

* "England owes it to the Puritans that she ever became Protestant."
Bancroft.

The historian, Hume, certainly not biassed in favor of these persons, could not have bestowed a higher eulogium on them than when he says: "So absolute was the authority of the Crown, (in Elizabeth's reign,) that the precious spark of liberty had been kindled, and was preserved by *the Puritans alone* ; and it was to that sect that the English owe **THE WHOLE FREEDOM OF THEIR CONSTITUTION.**"—*His. Eng.* vol. v., p. 189.

they planted and watered the tree that shelters and blesses us. Great and good men! our spirits bow in voluntary homage to your worth, and our hearts swell in gratitude to you and your God, for the civil and religious institutions you, by his blessing, here established and transmitted to us.

But to proceed from a general view of the subject to that particular branch of it that specially invites our attention on this interesting occasion, I am led to observe,—the enterprise which resulted in the colonization of the church first established in this place, was but the child of the parent enterprise by which pure religion was introduced and perpetuated in our land. The hand of God is clearly seen, in directing the minds of the founders of this church, to a project involving so much hazard, and designed for so much good, as the emigration of a handful of christians at such an early date,* to a distant part of a savage and unexplored country, and the establishment there of the ordinances of religion. Noble was the undertaking, signal the Providence that directed, and great the blessings that crowned it. Impelled by a burning desire to glorify God, by

* This emigration to Carolina, in 1696, being sixteen years after the first settlement of Charleston, at White Point, its present site, was made during the administration of John Archdale, the Quaker Governor, who was the immediate successor of Landgrave Smith in that office. The settlement at Dorchester was the first that was made out of Charleston, when the country was altogether in its wild, aboriginal state.

carrying the ordinances of his house to the remote places in which they contemplated settling, as well as by sympathy for their brethren there, in their spiritual destitutions,* they commenced the undertaking. Their first step was to unite

* "A knowledge of the exigencies of that colony in this momentous concern, with applications for relief, excited the attention and commiseration of christians at a distance."—*Holmes' An.* ii. 34.

"And," says their Pastor, in taking leave of them, "you well know what importunity, both by letter and otherwise, was used with our minister, that both a minister should be sent to those remote parts and that he should be here ordained also; sundry Godly christians there being prepared for and longing after, the enjoyment of all the edifying ordinances of God; there being withal in that country neither ordained minister nor any church in full Gospel order; so neither imposition of the hands of the Presbytery, nor donation of the right hand of fellowship can be expected there."—*Farewell Sermon of Rev. Mr. Danforth to the Colony, when leaving.*

There is not so much error in the above as has been supposed. He doubtless refers to his own denomination. There may have been an Episcopal Church in Carolina at that date (St. Philip's Church, Charleston,) and perhaps a Baptist Church, but no allusion is made here to either, being of other denominations, and not available for the purpose referred to. The Independent (now the Circular) Church, the only one with which the colonists could fellowship in ecclesiastical order, having been collected according to Dr. Ramsay, "about 1690," either had not at this date been fully organized, though they may have had religious services before; or else was at the time, 1696, without a Pastor. The latter may have been the case, though the former is perhaps more probable, even on the supposition that Dr. Ramsay is correct, for, it is said, (*Coll. Mass. His. Soc.*, vol. iv., p. 128,) "The Rev. John Cotton came to Charleston and gathered a church in 1698," which the account affirms, was then first incorporated two years after the settlement at Dorchester. Besides, Mr. Danforth, it appears, must have been advised as to the state of religion here; for, it is intimated he received written communications requesting aid, and moreover one of the emigrants (see Harris' account of Dorchester,) William Norman, *was originally from Carolina*, and probably carried information of the existing destitution. The above would seem to show, that the Congregational church at Dorchester was, at least the earliest *organized* church of that order in the State.

themselves in one band of christian brethren, to carry the pure word of Christ and the ordinances of his house with them, and having provided themselves with a minister, ordained for this special work,* they took an affectionate leave of their friends, with many tears and much prayer, and set sail, in two vessels, for Carolina.†

Thus did those worthy men, in the very beginning of their undertaking, evince their high estimate of religion, and their dependance upon it for a crowning blessing on all they did. Who does not, has neither learned what alone is truly valuable, nor how vain are all his efforts for success without that "blessing which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow therewith." A correct beginning, a commencement in the love and fear of God, is essential to a prosperous issue in any undertaking. How much counsel has come to naught, and how many plans have proved abortive, by the absence of this true secret of success in all the affairs of life !

Having begun their enterprise by covenanting with God to act for his glory, they continued

*"Oct. 22d, 1695, being our lecture day, was set apart for the ordaining of Mr. Joseph Lord to be Pastor of a church, gathered that day, to go to South-Carolina to settle the gospel there."—*Records of the Second Church, Dorchester, Mass.*

† The Church sailed at night, Dec. 14th, 1695, in two vessels. A severe gale was experienced soon after their embarkation, and one of the vessels, "The Skiff," came very near being lost. A day of fasting and prayer was observed aboard. One vessel arrived in about 14 days, the other had a passage of near a month.—*Orig. Rec. in Dor., Mass.*

it in the exercise of humility and faith. Encountering dangerous storms at sea, they fasted and humbled themselves before the Eternal One. Oh what an interesting, sacred company, did those two frail barks contain? Infancy, not knowing whither it went; youth, with all its joyousness; middle age, with its conscious weight of responsibility; the old and the young, the strong and the weak, the protector and the protected; a sacred company—aye, sacred, because they were *a whole church of Christ*, with their chosen, consecrated pastor in their midst! In their trouble, when far away from kindred and friends, on the wide waste, when the tempest howled and the yawning deep threatened to swallow them up, they called upon that Almighty Saviour whom the winds and the sea obey. Nor was He slow to hear. The sea was rebuked. Blessed with fair winds and pleasant weather for the rest of the voyage, they arrived in Carolina. Threading their way up the Ashley River, in quest of a convenient site for a settlement, they came to this vicinity and located.

Here again, are we called upon to recognize the unseen, almighty hand of the same ONE who had put it into their hearts to come out here, who had helped them on the way, and who was now present to preserve and prosper them in their new habitation. Methinks I see them, a few solitary families of strangers, twenty miles from the dwell-

ings of any white persons, in the heart of this, that was then, one wide unbroken forest. In these dense woods prowled wild beasts of prey and savage men*—more to be dreaded than they. Often during the day, in the absence of the father, has the timid mother, as she heard the scream of the wild beast, or a sudden noise in the thicket, folded her babe more closely to her breast, and offered prayer to that God who is able to save such as put their trust in Him. And when darkness curtained their dwellings, and the thick gloom of night pervaded these forests, they laid them down in painful uncertainty whether the morning sun would see them and their homes in safety or not. But the great God was pledged for their defence. Under each roof was offered the morning and evening sacrifice, and there were hearts that trusted in Him. Around such dwellings the Lord encampeth ; from such hearts He withholdeth no good thing.

Neither did they fail to continue their acknowledgement of Him in a *public* capacity. Shortly after their arrival, on 2d February, 1696, under

* The two most powerful tribes of Indians in the vicinity, were the Westos and Stonos. The former were in the immediate neighborhood, having a settlement and a burying ground on the plantation, Westoe, now owned by G. H. Smith, Esq., where quantities of their bones are often discovered. They were very hostile, and we are told, the whites, while erecting their dwellings, were obliged to station sentinels to watch against their savage foe.

the spreading branches of an oak,* now near us, venerable by having sheltered many generations, they first took the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and renewed their vows and thanksgivings to Christ their Saviour. Soon after, they completed and consecrated with prayer the house in which we worship to-day. Here for two generations, under three successive Pastors,† they worshipped God, were prospered, enlarged and built up. Here the inspired word had free course and was glorified. Here converts to Christ were multiplied. Here many were brought into the fold of the good Shepherd, and after having served God in their generation, sustained by a good hope through grace, were gathered to their fathers in peace. And when in the course of events, by the providence of God, a large part of the congregation removed to

* The tree, designated by tradition, still stands, stretching out its weather-beaten limbs, affording a shelter to the living and to the resting places of the dead.

† The Pastors have been, (previous to the removal of a portion of the congregation to Georgia, in 1753,) Rev. Joseph Lord, who came with the colony from Massachusetts, and returned in 1719; Rev. Hugh Fisher, who died here in 1731; Rev. John Osgood, a native of this place who was educated at Harvard University, and ordained here in 1734-5, and in 1753 went to Georgia at the removal. (Since the re-opening of the Church,) Rev. James Adams, now deceased; Rev. L. C. Parks, also deceased; Rev. Wm. States Lee, now of Presbyterian Church, Edisto Island; Rev. Edward Palmer, now of Bethel Church, Walterboro'; Rev. I. S. K. Axon, now of Midway, Geo.; Rev. Geo. Sheldon, now officiating.

Georgia,* his blessing went with those who went, nor was his covenant care entirely withdrawn from those who remained, nor from the house called by his name. For after the desolations of many years, and after this consecrated edifice had been used for unhallowed purposes by a foreign soldiery,† it pleased God on the return of peace between this and the mother country, to put it into the hearts of devout persons, to rebuild those parts of the sanctuary that were broken down, and once more set up the gates of the Lord's House. Actuated by a generous spirit, they repaired and finished the edifice, and left it to us in the form in which we have it now. It is grateful to peruse the list of contributions, and see what a general and sincere interest the repairs of the church, subsequent to the war of our Independence, awakened—much as the Jews were moved to rebuild their Temple after the desolation of the captivity. While a larger number contributed toward the more general restoration of the house of worship, we have been, from time to time, indebted to the munificence of seve-

* The quantity of land being too limited for the increasing wants of the people, the unhealthfulness of Dorchester in the hot season, summer retreats not being then known, were among the reasons for the removal. That congregation in Georgia, have been greatly blessed, wonderfully preserved and built up.

† The church was used as a barrack by the British, during the war of the Revolution, and the pews and pulpit mostly destroyed.

ral individuals, for affording it furniture and a small measure of endowment.*

The later history of the church is familiar. Though it has seen many a dark day, and the light has been dim in the sanctuary, the candlestick has not been removed from its place, and by the continued use of the ordinances of his house, we are assured the Lord hath not forgotten to be gracious.

And now, my hearers, let us suffer ourselves to be admonished and instructed by the associations of this occasion : let us make a due estimate of the wisdom of our ancestors. How priceless must be that freedom of conscience which they freely consented to secure at such a cost ! How rich and valuable must be the privilege of worshiping God, unawed by an overbearing hierarchy, untrammelled by rites of human appointment ! when those brave, great and good men were willing to sacrifice so much of ease, comfort, of home, and come to these ends of the earth, that they might enjoy it. Nor did they prize it too highly. Recreant and unworthy

* The benefactors, from whom the church has received some of its funds are : Mrs. Ann Boone, £100 sterling ; Madam Sarah Fenwicke, £358 sterling ; Mrs. John Waring, \$2,043 ; Thos. Smith, Sen., (for many years a Deacon in the church, and its zealous supporter,) \$1,000 ; Dr. Richard Waring, ——— ; besides Mr. John Rose, also a Deacon, to whom the church is indebted for a valuable pulpit bible, which has been in use for nearly half of a century, and others who have contributed various articles of communion and other furniture.

will their sons be, if they esteem it less. Mistaken will they be, if they think there is any other real secret of prosperity, but in commencing all their undertakings, as their fathers did, in the fear of God, and with a desire to advance his glory ; or any other means of true happiness, but by communion with Him, and fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. Delinquent indeed will they be, if it shall be found they undervalue or slight the advantages they have, so valuable in themselves, and bought at such a price !

Besides, by observing the providential preservation of the church, from generation to generation, amid numerous enemies and imminent dangers, always "built upon the same foundation of prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone," let us suffer ourselves to be admonished of the perpetuity and immortality of truth. Like the God of truth, whose years fail not and whose nature knows no change, it is everlasting and ever the same. Holiness, justice, mercy, are eternal. The same gracious God, without change of character, determination or disposition, who covenanted with Abraham, and with our fathers, deigns to covenant, on the same terms, with us. The same Sun of Righteousness, the glorious centre of the great and gracious system of man's redemption, that has "risen on the world with healing in his wings," and in a benighted period of the world, enlight-

ened the darkened understandings and warmed the cold hearts of those who have preceded us in the line of being, and from whom we have received the transmitted ordinances of God's House, still shines, affording light and life to us. May we ever regard Him, as to his exalted nature and proper offices, in his own meridian, zenith, altitude ; bright, effulgent, glorious, infinite.

As "truth is in order to holiness," our sanctification can never be in advance of our knowledge, and will be, if we be sincere, in proportion to our right apprehensions of it. A cordial belief in the lost and helpless condition of man by nature ; the imputed righteousness of Christ his only hope ; the efficient office of the Spirit in justification and sanctification ; and the absolute sovereignty of the Holy One, is of paramount importance. This our fathers believed. These truths they loved and rested their souls upon, as an integral part of "the faith once delivered to the saints." God grant they may ever be precious to all who shall worship in this holy place.

Let us also be admonished by the reflections of this day, of the value of the blessings associated with God's worship. Inasmuch as the spiritual part of man is of more worth than the natural, and his eternal interest of more moment than his temporal ; these services, to which we give attendance here, are of more consequence

than all our business besides. It is not a vain thing, my friends, to which your attention is called, from this sacred desk, from one holy day to another : it is *your life*. It very intimately concerns your present and eternal well-being. Would that there were in all who hear me a heart diligently to hearken to the voice of the Lord, and labor for the things that belong to their peace, before they be forever hidden from their eyes.

In conclusion, let us suffer ourselves to be admonished of the rapid flight of time ; a consideration of which should quicken us in every good work. How truly is the Scripture fulfilled to our observation. "One generation passeth away and another generation cometh." Not only has every hand, occupied in the erection of this sacred edifice, mouldered back to its kindred dust, and all those amid whose prayers and tears this vine of the Lord was planted, long since gone to their reward, but their successors also,—their children and their children's children, are gathered to their fathers, and sleep around the consecrated place where they worshipped. And even when we look around for those whose lot was cast in a more recent date, who like Nehemiah, mourned over the desolations of Zion, who set up the gates of the Lord's House, and kindled anew the fire on his altar, we look in vain. Their venerable forms are not in the places they were wont to occupy here. Not one of them remains. Those

of another generation occupy their seats. Oh that the children might inherit the *spirit* as well as the privileges of their fathers! This day, my friends, is full of instruction. We are among the memorials of the past. Every *brick* in these venerable walls, that have looked down on *five generations*, has a tongue, that utters thanksgiving to God, and solemn, wholesome admonition to us. "Be ye followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The shortness of life, and the certainty of death, are both equally ordained. Our sands will be soon run. We cannot but be reminded, by the associations of this occasion, that long ere *another* such anniversary as we now observe shall occur, our heads will be laid. On that day, neither we nor our children will be here. God, in his mercy, grant we all, and they all, may be rendering Him pure and happy worship, in his *upper sanctuary*.
AMEN.



